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CHAPTER XIII.

HISTORICAL SOCIETIES IN THE UNITED STATES.

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HISTORY AND CONDITION.

EARLY HISTORY—NUMBER AND IMPORTANCE OF SOCIETIES—CHARACTER AND EXTENT OF COLLECTIONS—IMPETUS GIVEN TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS—STATE SOCIETIES—SPECIAL AND LOCAL SOCIETIES—MEMBERSHIP—MEETINGS—FUNDS, INCOME, AND EXPENDITURES—HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS—GENEALOGICAL, FAMILY, AND TOWN HISTORIES—PLANS FOR THE FUTURE—NATIONAL HISTORICAL CONVENTION.

In the attempt to collect the most recent statistics which should exhibit the intellectual condition of the United States, it was impossible to overlook so important an illustration of the subject as would be offered by a view of its historical societies. From the facts shown in the statistical tables, and from those which we have gathered from other sources, it is evident that diligent workers in preserving the history of the nation have been numerous, and that whatever neglect there has been in the pursuit of science or literature, we cannot be said to have equally neglected our own history.

During the past one hundred years of our national life, the historical spirit could not fail to be awakened; the degree of its development, as compared with the colonial period, has depended in no small measure upon the freedom of the people under our republican institutions. Where there are no political or social restraints upon the opportunities for co-operation, the historical spirit will effectively develop itself at an early stage in the life of the commonwealth.

In proof of this, we find that since the organization of the government in 1789 under the Constitution, there have been formed more than one hundred and sixty historical societies, the greater number of which have perpetuated their organizations. The object of these societies has been essentially the same, to collect and diffuse the materials of American history. It was declared by the first one of the historical societies, organized in 1791, and afterwards called the Massachusetts Historical

society, that its object was "to collect, preserve, and communicate materials for a complete history of the country." No limitation of aims was made in behalf of the State, or of New England. Later, in 1804, the New York Historical, and, in 1823, the New Hampshire Historical Societies were organized, each "for the purpose of discovering, procuring, and preserving whatever may relate to the natural, civil, literary, and ecclesiastical history of the United States, and of this State in particular." Societies formed at a later period, in defining their object, either give the State precedence of the United States, or omit the United States entirely. Thus the Historical Society of Pennsylvania declares its single object to be "the elucidation of the civil and literary history of the State." We think, therefore, notwithstanding the more comprehensive schemes set forth by the earlier societies, that it has come to be their object generally, to collect the materials for the history of the State, county, or town where the society is situated, and then, as circumstances may favor, of the United States and the individual States.

The principal means employed for accomplishing the object aimed at have been the establishment of libraries, the collection of manuscripts, the forming of museums of historical memorials and of the natural history of the region, and the printing of historical documents. Their purpose has been to collect and to render accessible to the public the materials for history, but not to write history under the sanction of the societies.

The libraries formed by these societies, for the use of their members and all other accredited persons, are alone a fair evidence of their earnestness, when we consider that the works collected in them relate chiefly to American history. The number of volumes known to be contained in them amounts, as far as can be gathered from the reports received, to more than 482,000, and more than 568,000 pamphlets. The books are solely for reference. Additions are continually made, but with no purpose of building up a large library, unless it should consist of historical works. In some towns and cities, however, the library, for purposes of convenience, is also made miscellaneous in its character for more general uses.

The zeal of the members in securing and preserving historical manuscript is sufficiently illustrated by the fact that the Massachusetts Historical Society has collected a thousand volumes of such manuscripts; and the New York Historical Society counts 15,000 single manuscripts; while the number possessed by all the societies is reported at 88,771, besides 1,361 bound volumes. These manuscripts relate to every period since the founding of the colonies. During many years the apartments of these two societies, of the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, Mass., and of one or two other societies, were the only places that offered for the especial and safe deposit of manuscripts, the State libraries not having been generally organized. The States of Maryland and Georgia have made the libraries for their State societies places of deposit of valu-

able State historical records. The younger State societies manifest an ardor in this direction, which indicates that they are managed by the sons of worthy sires. The character and subjects of the manuscripts collected may be inferred from the contents of the publications of the societies, of which we shall soon speak. The whole number of manuscripts in their libraries exceeds that of those which are to be found in the State libraries, if we exclude the official State records in the latter.

In addition to books and manuscripts, the societies have formed museums, and have sedulously collected in their halls memorials of the aborigines, of their arts and customs, relics of the prehistoric races, and of the founders and early settlers, with portraits of distinguished citizens, and cabinets of coins. Some of them have extensive collections in natural history. In these respects they resemble, as far as our circumstances will permit, the archæological societies which exist in so many of the counties of Great Britain.

The large number of volumes thus far published by our historical societies is a most substantial proof of the efficient industry of their members. The number of printed pages issued by them, chiefly during the last seventy-five years, is equal to more than three hundred volumes of three hundred and fifty pages each. A detailed description of their contents here would be impossible. They include town and church histories, town and parish records, journals and correspondence of the Revolution, private diaries, biographies, genealogies, deeds, wills, and family papers of citizens, illustrations of aboriginal life and history, annotated reprints of rare and early books relating to America, and other similar materials.

The incidental operations of the societies are to meet during the year with more or less frequency for the discussion of subjects of historical interest, to provide for the delivery of an annual public historical discourse, and to secure popular courses of lectures on historical and scientific subjects, rather than on themes of society and literature. Some of the discourses delivered on their anniversary occasions—three at least of which have been given by men who have been Presidents of the United States—will long remain monuments of patriotic eloquence and witnesses to important truths in our history.

The societies have, moreover, at different times in several States, been active in calling the attention of State legislatures to measures for the preservation and publication of the early public records of their States. These efforts have resulted in securing not only the printing of the colonial records in the State archives, but have led some States to procure copies of such documents as were to be found in the record offices of the states of Europe. In a few years we may expect that all such papers, existing either at home or abroad, will have been printed for public use. In the meantime other States, or their State societies, have obtained and printed calendars of the contents of such documents as could be found in England.

Membership in the societies is generally secured by the vote of a majority; sometimes by the payment of an annual tax; in other societies it is restricted by the negative vote of a small minority. The resident members, residing in the town, county, or State, have alone the right to vote. Some societies are managed entirely by an executive committee. The number of members does not appear to be fixed and limited in more than three societies. The Massachusetts society was at first organized on this principle, and limited to thirty members, latterly increased to one hundred. The American Antiquarian Society, organized within the same State a score of years after, adopted the same principle. The Maine Society, a daughter of Massachusetts, organized in 1822, did not depart from the mother's example. But whatever may be the advantages supposed to inhere in a limited membership, the fact that the practice has not been adopted by other societies, is evidence of a decided preference for an enlarged membership, not fixed by law. The number of members of the several societies ranges from fifty to over one thousand, the largest membership being usually in the largest cities. The aggregate membership of all the societies, according to the latest returns received, is 27,244.

The income of most of the societies is derived from an initiation fee of \$3, \$5, or \$10, and an annual tax of from \$1 to \$5 on each member. In many cases the annual dues constitute the sole regular income of a society. Life memberships are encouraged. The expenditures of the societies are defrayed from these sources, or by extraordinary subscriptions—special permanent funds created by the gifts of the members and their friends, and in a few cases by annual or special grants from the State legislature. The Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin State societies receive, the first, \$2,500, the second, \$500, and the last, \$7,000 a year from the State treasuries, which sum is used for the purchase of books, for salaries, and other expenses. The Tennessee and some other societies are provided with apartments in the State capitol. The value of the lands, edifices, and permanent funds of all the societies approaches \$2,000,000; the amount reported, not including all the societies, is \$1,674,973.88. It would not be reasonable to name a lower sum than another million of dollars to represent the value of their libraries, manuscripts, and museums; although it is next to impossible to make a pecuniary estimate of the amount.

The meetings of the societies are either annual, semi-annual, quarterly, monthly, or twice a month during six to nine months of the year.

Most of the societies whose names are given in our list may be classed as either State or local societies. State societies have been formed in twenty-two of the thirty-seven States, although one or two of them can hardly be said to exist at present. From the prominence which the State societies give to the history of the State in their plans, they are properly entitled to bear the name of the State which they represent.

They generally have the seat of their operations at the capital of the State or in the largest city.

The local societies, named after a town, county, or district, limit themselves to the history of the region indicated by their name, and do not generally attempt to embrace the larger purposes of the State societies. Very few of them have combined with their plans for collecting their own civil history, the study of other branches of history, or science. They are not affiliated in any way with State societies, except in Michigan, where incorporated local societies are required to report annually to the State society, and to send to it copies of papers which have been read before them. They frequently have libraries and museums for the preservation of historical relics. Both classes of societies occasionally embrace in their plans other aims than American history. The New York and Maryland societies have galleries of paintings, and the former a collection of Egyptian antiquities. The Long Island Society has a collection of paintings. The Georgia Society has a general library and reading room.

There are at least nine historical associations engaged in the work of preserving the history of as many of the ecclesiastical denominations of the country, and most of them have formed libraries for the purpose.¹

During the last twenty-five years, and more especially during the last ten years, there has arisen a spontaneous and widely spread enthusiasm to form associations of pioneers and old residents for the purpose of cherishing the memory of the first settlers and preserving incidents connected with the early settlement of different counties and towns. These continue for a series of years to have annual addresses, or to publish occasional historical papers of great interest for the locality. The earliest association of this nature was the Old Colony Club, founded at Plymouth, Mass., in 1769, by which was inaugurated the custom of celebrating Forefathers' Day by an annual discourse. As adjuncts to the societies peculiarly historical should be counted the ethnological, numismatic, philological, geographical, and statistical societies. They are all contributors, in a greater or less degree, to the civil and political history of the country, or to the history of the native races. The several printing clubs, engaged in printing small editions of rare historical books, freshly annotated, or of unpublished manuscripts, have performed an important service. Their enterprises have

¹An effort was made to collect the statistics of the diocesan libraries of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and from a few registrars returns were received showing that in nine such collections there are 730 volumes, 14,924 pamphlets, and 259 manuscripts, the books and pamphlets mainly consisting of diocesan journals, proceedings of conventions, and other periodical and fugitive literature relating to the church. No description of the manuscripts was given. These collections will, in time, become valuable to the student of ecclesiastical history.

Rev. William Stevens Perry, D. D., of Geneva, N. Y., is custodian of the Church Archives, which "consist of 500 volumes of most valuable manuscripts."—EDITORS.

not been conducted with a view to pecuniary advantage. The numerous New England societies at the West and South, awaken an interest in historical studies, by the frequent annual discourses which are delivered under their auspices, in which the virtues and errors of the forefathers are discussed for the benefit of the present generation.

VALUABLE RESULTS.

From the statements we have made regarding the character and condition of the historical societies, no one would hesitate to conclude that they have already accomplished a great work or to infer, from the records of their operations during three-score years and more, that results of still greater importance will follow. The value of their labors is not likely to be overestimated; and a perusal of the details of the history of many of the societies can alone give an idea of the patient devotedness and affection for their object of many members during a long series of years. They have steadily pursued their patriotic impulses as though they were yielding obedience to the behest of the most exalted virtue. It has been by the exhibition of this disinterested attachment to their cause, which it is a pleasure to contemplate, that they have obtained so many valuable contributions from their own members, from the public, and the State.

The libraries and museums of the societies, besides increasing in size, will, with the lapse of years, have an increasing value for the public. It has only been by gradual, slow additions to their funds, that any of these societies have been able to secure convenient apartments and a curator, so that their collections, the gifts of members and friends, could be accessible to more than a very limited number. In the future, with the possession of suitable edifices, open under charge of officers, these institutions will be useful to the community in a degree hitherto unknown. The libraries will be more complete on their special subjects; their rare manuscripts, increased in number, will be found in the places where they are most needed. The guarantee which their halls will offer for the safety and care of manuscripts and historical relics will be appreciated, and citizens will be glad to deposit in their archives the treasures which they possess and thus save them from destruction. How many valuable documents have already been lost from the absence of such societies? How many have already been saved by their existence? Memorials of founders, pilgrims, and settlers, as well as of ancient customs, are destined to be regarded with a growing interest; and when the period shall have come that not an uncivilized Indian remains, every material vestige of the race will be gazed at with admiration. Already the exhumed arrow-heads, hatchets, and sculptured stones, which had been quietly noticed for scores of years as memorials of existing races of Indians, have acquired a fresh value since we have been led to attempt to discriminate which of them may have been wrought thousands of years since by races not yet identified.

While the "discovery and preservation" of manuscripts and memorials is a prime motive for the existence of these societies, their efforts in that direction do not present themselves so prominently to the appreciation of the public as do those historical volumes by which they "communicate and diffuse" a knowledge of the documents which they have collected. In the three hundred volumes published by them, to which we have already referred, there are to be found copies of many unique manuscripts, which were, of course, difficult of access. By the multiplication, through the press, of hundreds of these copies, even if the manuscript itself were lost, an easy acquaintance with its contents is secured to investigators. Many a rare volume also, the purchase of which might cost half a year's income to a poor student, when reprinted by a society, is put within his reach in every library. Both the manuscript and the rare book have thus the opportunity to carry down the stream of time the record first made hundreds of years ago.

A special illustration of the value of these publications is offered in the thirty-five volumes published by the New England Historic-Genealogical Society. Before its formation in 1845, the whole number of American genealogical histories was not more than thirty. They now number more than four hundred, and the later histories are incomparably more thorough and complete. There is every reason to suppose that the work will be prosecuted till the genealogical story of a great portion of the early settlers of New England shall have been written and published. In succeeding years it may be found that these facts will have a value beyond anything designed in their compilation, by enabling the man of science to trace the influences of varied climate and education, of the laws of hereditary influence, and the comparative ability of different nations, from a larger number of similar facts than was ever before collected. Family history in the past has had for its object to trace the pedigree of successful families in a single line of descent. Few genealogies have attempted to give the affiliations and ramifications of all the descendants of a common ancestor for many generations. In this respect the pursuit is not a minister to pride, but has a tendency to promote a sense of republican equality. It is not necessary to have in one's veins "the blood of all the Howards" to secure an interest in our genealogical relations.

The influence of the historical societies in securing the preparation and publication of town histories has been remarkable. More than two hundred have been published in the last thirty years. The thirty town histories of New Hampshire have all been prepared since the formation of its society in 1823. All these histories have an exactness and thoroughness not to be found in those of early date. The larger portion of them are written by those who are members of historical societies, and who are indebted to the collections in their libraries for their most important facts, for materials without which it would have been impossible to perfect their works. The fact that four of the New

England States¹, have authorized towns to tax themselves to procure the publication of town histories is an evidence of the stimulus which has been imparted to the undertaking by these societies.

The compilation of a town history is not an undertaking that can be begun and finished in a few months. Consequently, since the enactment of State laws authorizing towns to incur the expense, although the number of histories published by them is already considerable, yet the results expected to follow from the power of taxation must necessarily be developed gradually. Authors of histories need time and opportunity to collect, digest, and develop their materials.

The course pursued by the towns that authorize the publication of their town histories is, to take a vote upon the subject at the annual town meeting, the call for the meeting having specified that the subject will be introduced. A committee of publication is nominated and chosen, and this committee selects a gentleman to prepare the history under its general direction. An appropriation at that or a subsequent meeting is made to cover the expense.

A few details of some specific cases are subjoined as illustrations of the method pursued. The town of Pittsfield, Mass., for example, in full town meeting, on the proposition by a citizen, appointed a committee of five to write a history of the town, with authority to select an editor. The committee chose Mr. J. E. A. Smith to compose the history and to arrange the materials, itself giving general directions and aiding in the work. The town made at the same meeting the necessary appropriation of money for the expense to be incurred. The first volume, containing 518 octavo pages, was stereotyped and printed in 1869, and the town retains the copyright. The history reaching only to the year 1800, a second volume is to follow speedily. The town of Warwick, Mass., chose a committee of seven to adopt such measures as they might deem expedient for the publication of the manuscript of J. Blake's history. The call for the annual meeting contained a notification that the question of an appropriation for this purpose would be introduced, and at the meeting it was voted to publish it, and the same committee was em-

¹ The following are the legal provisions for the publication of town histories in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts:

Maine.—"Cities and towns may raise money for the purpose of procuring the writing and publication of their histories."—*Rev. Stat.*, 1871, *tit. I*, *sec.* 36.

New Hampshire.—"Any town, at a legal meeting called for the purpose, may authorize their selectmen to contract with some person to prepare and publish the early history of such town, at the expense of the town, under such restrictions and regulations as such town shall prescribe."—*Laws of* 1868.

Vermont.—"Any town, at their annual March meeting, may authorize their selectmen to contract with some person to prepare and publish the early history of such town, at the expense of the town, under such restrictions and regulations as such town shall prescribe."—*Gen. Stat.*, 2d ed., 1870, *tit. IX*, *sec.* 91.

Massachusetts.—"Towns may, at legal meetings, grant and vote such sums as they may judge necessary for the following purposes: For . . . procuring the writing and publishing of their town histories."—*General Statutes*, 1860, *chap.* 18, *sec.* 10.

powered to borrow the money necessary. The history of the town of Northfield, Mass., was printed in 1875, by Mr. Munsell, of Albany, in a volume of 630 pages, much of it in fine type. The town paid \$4 a copy for 320 copies, out of an edition of 500 copies. The authors received as their share 125 copies. The inhabitants had the privilege of purchasing copies from the town at \$1 each. No others can obtain the work, either from the town or the publisher, except at an advanced price. The history of the towns embraced in the original township of Reading, Mass., prepared by Hon. Lilley Eaton, was published in 1871 by the authority and at the expense of the town of Wakefield, one of the towns included, through the agency of a committee appointed for the purpose after his death. The town of Bradford, Vt., employed the Rev. S. McKeen to write and publish the history of the town. The town owns the edition, and sells copies of it at a fixed sum, on application being made to any one of the selectmen. The Middlebury Historical Society of Vermont embarked in the enterprise of securing histories of all the towns of Addison County. As one result of its exertions, the town of Shoreham made an appropriation for the completion and publication of a history, and appointed the Rev. J. F. Goodhue, a former citizen, to compile it, under the superintendence of a committee. He came and took up his residence there until he had completed a work which he had formerly prepared, and the committee published it. It bears on the title-page, "Published by the town."¹ The history of Winchester, Conn., by J. Boyd, was published by him, but with pecuniary aid in the undertaking from the town. The town of Barnstead, N. H., having declined to bear the expense of printing a history prepared by R. R. Caverly, he was afterward enabled to publish it through aid received from individual citizens.

The prefaces to C. Hudson's two histories of Lexington and Marlborough, Mass., as well as the preface to the history of Pittsfield, prepared by the town committees, give ample details of the method of procedure of the authorities in these particular cases. As regards the regulations for the disposal and distribution, by sale or otherwise, of the copies of these histories, the practice varies in different towns. The histories themselves, in the prefaces, give very little information on the point.

The members of historical societies individually have, besides, published many historical monographs, biographies, and genealogies, as the bibliographical records in their archives show. Their labors, also, as editors of historical magazines supported by subscription, deserve mention. Though these periodicals have had but a few years of life, they have been convenient depositories for historical studies and the waifs of history, and have aided to sustain an interest in the subject.

¹As showing the impulse given to historical research, it may be mentioned that since 1858, the year in which the law was enacted, histories of the following named towns in Vermont, besides those above mentioned, have been published: Bennington, Cornwall, Danby, Fairhaven, Middlebury, Middletown, Montpelier, Pawlet, Reading, Rutland, Salisbury, and Wells.—EDITORS.

The historical fervor stimulated by the operations of the societies in the Atlantic States, has been manifested in a remarkable degree in the Western States. Several of them have commenced their life as States with the organization of a historical society. The Minnesota society was created by an act of its first territorial legislature. Such organizations are a testimony to the high grade of civilization with which these new communities enter the family of States. They constitute the first embodiment of their men of culture, eager to achieve something for the common weal outside of the direct necessities of domestic and civil life. These pioneer founders from the Atlantic States saw that they had not only to preserve the memory of the French and early settlers, but that they were in the presence of the monuments of departed races, which, though already abraded by the hand of time, were certain to be more rapidly effaced by the hand of man. They felt the need of insuring protection for them, by co-operative action, that their history might be the better investigated. It is especially in those States that the legislatures have encouraged the societies by annual grants of money, free apartments, (devolving upon the society the care of the State library,) or, as in Michigan, have provided for the care of the collections of the State society in the State library.

While the history of any nation has a positive value to the world, that of the United States has a special importance, on account of the character of our institutions. It is probable that this history will be preserved with a completeness unparalleled in the annals of any people. It is one of the first attempts ever made to chronicle events contemporaneously with the beginnings of life of the municipality and the State. These events are recorded, not merely in relation to matters of government and war, but of education, morals, and religion. The knowledge will be perpetuated of the character and acts of the numerous races and families from all quarters of the globe who, under novel conditions, commenced social and political life in the counties and towns of which the totality of the nation consists. These records continued through centuries will furnish most trustworthy facts for statistical tables to illustrate the laws affecting these relations. It is to this important work that each active historical society is a substantial contributor.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

With this abundant evidence before us of the character and value of the work of the historical societies, it is none the less accordant with our progressive natures to be inquiring whether by any means they can be rendered more effective and useful. As regards the State societies, we think the answer to the question may be safely left to their own intelligent action, stimulated by the example of kindred societies among us. The object which they have in view is broad enough to occupy them permanently. We hopefully predict that before ten years shall have elapsed there will be a society of their especial scope in every State.

In regard to the local societies, however, which have been formed in so considerable numbers, and which will continue to be formed in a ratio surpassing that of any former period, there are good grounds for inquiring whether their specific object might not be attained equally well, and other important advantages gained at the same time, by enlarging their aims. Why should they not, instead of limiting their pursuit to their own localities, embrace the history of all ages and peoples? Why should the incipient impulse to co-operate in some useful investigation be restrained at the beginning to the scenes and events immediately at hand? Were these local societies organized for the pursuit of history in all its branches, civil, political, educational, and religious, as wide as the world, we might expect there would be such a variety of interesting themes to discuss, that frequent meetings could successfully be maintained throughout the year.

Studies in general history, pursued in local societies, would insure for those engaged in them the most healthy mental discipline, and education of an ennobling nature. The history of man in all relations is an inexhaustible study, ever fresh, and expanding with civilization. It should produce a continual enthusiasm in these societies to be studying in conjunction with their local aims, the relations of the past with the relations of progress in different nations, to be observing the evidences of a divine moral order in the world, and the laws which affect the development of humanity. Our future statesmen, aglow with aspirations for a wise and beneficent government, need to be familiar with the history of other nations as well as of their own; to be able to compare ancient and modern republics; and linked as we are with the past, to judge what may be the limits to the maxim that history is philosophy teaching by example. From historical societies on such an expanded basis, we might hope there would be produced a generation of legislators with a scientific faculty to predict consequences; men who, impressed with a sense of the difficulties of enacting wise laws, would possess the wisdom to confront those difficulties.

To these observations on the question of enlarged plans for local societies, we venture to subjoin the further inquiry whether most county and town societies might not, with incalculable advantage, combine with historical research the study of science, art, and natural history? Every locality already has its military, fire, debating, literary, social or charitable society. It is incredible that there should be so few simply for the pursuit of knowledge to the acquisition of which all men are so naturally impelled and in which they manifest so deep an interest. The same motives, which dispose some of the leading minds of a place to associate for the sake of preserving its history, must be operating in the minds of others, their neighbors, to desire to acquire and communicate knowledge in other forms. On the part of those interested in history it should be regarded as a strong reason for extending the scope of their society, the consideration that when confined to a

single subject it will depend for its permanence on the activity of two or three members. It does not afford a basis sufficient for the active co-operation of more than a small portion of the cultivated minds of the place; the topics either soon become exhausted as matters of continual research, or the information is meagre and accumulates slowly, and the popular interest diminishes. The meetings cease to be attended and the society either dies of inanition or languishes while standing in the way of a new organization on a more comprehensive plan.

It may be urged as an objection that some of our societies have commenced with the title of "historical and philosophical," and have not been remarkably successful. Others, however, have tried the plan of conjoined aims, and congratulate themselves on the result. The Essex Institute, of Salem, Mass., was formed in 1848 from the union of a county historical and a county natural history society, and organized on a popular basis of large membership, having at the present time four hundred and eighty members. With the aid of historical and scientific workers it is prosecuting both branches with an efficiency, as shown by its publications, which must compel imitation. The Albany Institute, New York, has been perpetuated with varying fortunes for forty-six years, and has four departments of research, physical science and the arts, natural history, history, and general literature. It has at no time been so promising an organization as at the present, when it has been extended to a membership of two hundred and four. A similar successful society is the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool, England, founded in 1846, which has over two hundred members, and has published twenty-eight volumes of its transactions. The subjects treated of in these conform, in fair proportion of literature, history, and science, to the name of the society. One motive assigned in its constitution for organizing the society, "to modify the local tendency to the pursuit of commerce," is capable of receiving a wider application.

We have purposely alluded to the large membership in these three societies, because a late scientific writer, speaking of the frequent failures of the learned societies of the United States, declares that they have died from "a constant enlargement of the range of membership, and consequent lowering of the tone of the society."¹ And yet we draw from this same writer the two facts that the membership of the leading English societies ranges from four hundred to one thousand or several thousand¹ members, and that the annual tax on each member is from two to four guineas. We should infer from these facts that, by a large membership, an abundant income is secured for the purposes of a society, and that the original papers of the men of science who are joined with them can be published, and the expense of their investigations provided for. A large membership secures friends, an audience, an income, and elevates the purposes and aims of all. Some aid by active efforts, some by pecuniary help, and all by the sympathy of a common purpose. Mem-

¹ North American Review, October, 1874.

bership is not a reward of merit, acquired for achievements in literature or science, but an encouragement and a stimulus both to the less learned and to the most learned. It ought not to be difficult to combine the man of research with the intelligent aspirant for knowledge, who educates himself for similar researches by means of the companionship. To the man of science or invention it must be desirable that he should have the encouragement of a listening audience, and be brought in contact with men of varied pursuits, outside of his specialty. It affords him an opportunity at least to utter his words of scientific truth before his fellow-citizens. To make an addition to the sum of human knowledge, or to diffuse and inspire a love of it, may be of equal importance to humanity.

In suggesting this combination of varied objects of pursuit, we are not, of course, supposing that academies of scientists can be founded everywhere; but we cannot resist the belief that in most counties and towns there will be found a sufficient number of men of education, of all professions, occupations, and opinions, disposed to unite for the mutual pursuit of history, science, and the arts; and that they will engage in it, not in a spirit of exclusiveness, but of benevolence, aiming to develop a love for the most elevated and accurate forms of knowledge. It should be easy, in a multitude of places, for associations formed with these blended purposes, to sustain twice a month, or even weekly, during a large part of the year, meetings for the purpose of listening to papers, original or compiled, from members or invited speakers, or for the discussion of any topic introduced. By some such method as this, local societies would become schools of thought and learning for the active members of the community in hundreds of our towns and cities. There might naturally follow a union of the societies of a State under a general society for the publication of such papers as might be deemed suitable.

The extensive formation of such societies throughout the land, seems so full of promise and so potent for good, as to justify the establishment of a national society for the organization of associations for the pursuit of knowledge. Such a society might initiate efforts which would have the cordial support of co-workers in every State of the Union. The original name of our oldest learned society, the American Philosophical, of which Franklin was the first president, was "The American Society for Promoting and Propagating Useful Knowledge." The title is an indication of the expanded and benevolent designs of its founders. This society had, also, its standing committee on history and commerce. If the Smithsonian Institution, founded "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men," should be able to incorporate, with its present benefactions to science, the support of an agency for encouraging such societies as have been described, it might be hoped it would not be a departure from the spirit of its founder. It would be an agency, by whatever association it should be controlled, for introducing and

promoting a plan for enlisting tens of thousands in the direct study of science, art, and history. Such societies would be the means of educating many communities to a loving appreciation of scientific investigations, and of correct views of human history. They would contribute incalculably to the progress of American society and to the happiness of millions.

While we dwell with wonder and pleasure on the historic picture of our national growth during a century, we need to remember that it does not become us to rest satisfied solely with recording its details. If we have received a goodly heritage from those who have preceded us, we must not only bequeath it unimpaired, but strive to add to its value for the advantage of those who come after us; and so "hand on the torch of light," that the future may excel the past in brilliancy.¹

¹ The Missouri Historical Society, of St. Louis, at its meeting on June 17, 1875, adopted resolutions recommending that a national historical convention should be held during the Centennial anniversary of 1876, and that all the historical societies of the country should participate in it. If such a convention should be held, it would certainly be a favorable time to consider all plans which might be proposed to render town and county historical societies more permanent and enduring, and among them the plan suggested in this paper might find a place.



